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ABSTRACT

Action research is a way to examine purposes and practices in teaching. One way of conducting action research is to engage in participant observation, which may be seen as a systematic attempt to discover the knowledge that a group of people has learned and is using to organize the group's behavior. Participant observation has a great deal of potential for the classroom teacher. The first step is to identify a social situation in which the people, the place, and the activities are observed. A researcher's study of supermarket checkout operators illustrates the application of participant observation, which may be continuous or sampling. In this type of ethnographic research, the researcher is learning from people rather than studying them, so that a relationship of trust is essential. Use of systematic participant observation allows a teacher to: (1) gain insight into what is going on in the class; (2) gain ideas for future lessons; (3) address issues of equity, power, or control; (4) make assessment decisions; (5) look for causal relationships; (6) evaluate teaching practice; and (7) record the language that students use in a precise manner. (SLD)

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Participant Observation: A Way of Conducting Research

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PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION: A WAY OF CONDUCTING RESEARCH

Do you really know what goes on in your classroom? Are you aware who dominates discussion in group work? Action research gives us the opportunity to examine our purposes and practices in teaching. It encourages us to make our thinking about action more explicit through observing and engaging in classroom experiences and practices. One way of conducting Action Research is to engage in participant observation, which may be seen as a systematic attempt to discover the knowledge a group of people have learned and are using to organise their behaviour (Spradley, 1979). This form of ethnographic study may include "interviewing, observing, mining available documents and records, taking account of non-verbal cues, and interpreting inadvertent unobtrusive measures" Lincoln and Guba, 1985.

However, fundamental to the success of any naturalistic study is the role of the participant observer. Through observations you are "systematically looking at and recording behaviour for the purpose of making instructional decisions" (Pasanella and Volkmor, 1977). Usually this means beginning with general questions to get a broad picture, then refining it by focusing on particular aspects of the picture.

But you may be wondering why you should choose participant observation for your action research? As a teacher, you are in the best position to observe what goes on in your classroom, in other words to learn the 'culture' of your classroom. Through observation you can analyse: what people do (behaviour), what

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people use (artefacts) and what people say (speech messages). You can also evaluate:

- . group participation and responsiveness
- . individual behaviour within a group
- . individual and group attitudes
- . peer dynamics
- . classroom structure and organisation
- . teaching methods and materials
- . teaching style
- . learning environment
- . student-teacher interactions
- . development of the learner (history of success)

You may also choose to have a colleague conduct observations in your classroom, in order to validate your own observations, or to document your teaching practice.

The first step in participant observation is to identify a 'social situation'. In my own study of checkout operators in a supermarket, I identified three social situations in which checkout operators commonly operated: at the checkout, in the kiosk or tobacco shop, and at the shelves in the supermarket (Searle, 1991). If you are observing in a classroom you will need to locate a place where you can watch people as well as participate in activities. You may choose to focus on group work, whole class, or social interactions during coffee break. In each situation you will be observing: the place, the people (actors), and what is happening (the activities).

'Place' means any physical setting, so you need to describe both the space itself and the objects found there. Even in the familiar surroundings of a supermarket, I soon found that I didn't know what many of the objects were called, so I relied on 'insider' information to help me, that is asking the experts, the checkout operators themselves. Also when I started to observe the 'actors' all I saw were uniformed checkout operators. It was only with repeated observations that identifying features or behaviours emerged. Then I realised that behaviours and communication varied as the operators interacted with other classes of actors such as customers (of differing ages and personalities), the different staff in the store, sales representatives etc.

The third element in the social situation is 'the activities' which take place. At first you might only see what you expect to see, that is what you take for granted is going on, whether in the supermarket or the classroom. Again, it is only through repeated observations that individual acts fall into recognisable patterns of activity, for example packing groceries into bags at the supermarket. Sometimes these activities may be linked together to form larger patterns or 'events' such as, all the activities from fluffing out a new plastic bag, through scanning the items, packing them, to payment for the order, may be seen as "an event".

In my case, I was especially interested in the spoken and written language of the checkout operators. However I found I had to broaden my initial focus so as to include the multiple sign

systems with which the operators had to interact. So, after identifying the actors and the activities, I began to focus on language and communication, particularly that associated with 'events'.

There are two basic approached to observation, continuous observation and sampling observation. The continuous approach consists of observing over a given period of time such as an hour, a day, week or month. This is a good way to start in order to get an overview of what is going on. In my case it also provided an overview in the form of 'a day in the life of a checkout operator'.

Sampling observation involves relatively short, focused periods of observation. These may be random periods of time or observation of random actors, activities etc. More usually you would use sampling observation to clarify emerging questions such as "What does the checkout operator say/do when X happens?"

As you observe it is useful to make written field notes on site, in which each actor is identified and information is recorded exactly as it spoken or referred to, including use of any 'inside' words or phrases. You may choose to time your observations, so many minutes observing, X minutes writing notes. These notes are then expanded with as much detail as possible, immediately after the observation. At the same time a fieldwork journal should be kept in which to record your experiences, ideas, feelings or problems as well as a record of analysis, interpretations, or insights. It is also important that you check

your observation and perceptions with the actors for verification, correction or extension. You may also wish to identify, collect and analyse documents or records from each social situation, as these are in the language of the site and provide a rich source of contextually relevant information.

As the data is collected it must be systematically classified. This may be done with reference to Spradley's (1980) broad categories: space, objects, actors, activities, time, goals, feelings and routines. You will find that computers are really useful when it comes to cross-referencing. As your study proceeds you will be constantly sifting this data, classifying and re-classifying, for example "Is X similar to or different from Y?" in order to identify emerging themes.

As an ethnographer you will be learning from people rather than studying them and it is important that they do not feel threatened by your research or uneasy about being observed. The aim should be to establish a relationship of trust which should be beneficial to all.

Some of the advantages in using participant observation as a research methodology include:

- the focus on facts (not impressions or judgements)
- observation is a direct measure in a natural setting (as opposed to psychological testing in contrived settings)
- observations may be conducted during class time
- observation allows you to focus on particular targets and identify previously unnoticed behaviours/use of spoken or

written language

. observation increases awareness of how learning can be facilitated
. observation can aid in the selection of appropriate teaching strategies and materials
. observation is a useful tool to evaluate affective, social and management behaviour as well as the appropriateness and effectiveness of student language use.

Some of the disadvantages of participant observation as a research methodology include:

. participant observation could be seen as intervention as it may cause a change in student behaviour
. this method needs TIME
    - observations should be conducted over a period of time
    - data analysis is very time consuming
. sometimes it is difficult to 'see' what is going on
. observations and inferences need to be verified by more than one source (triangulation)
. this method results in vast quantities of data - you need to know where to stop and how best to analyse the data
. human error:
    - observer bias
    - you record what you think happened or make assumptions
    - accuracy and limit of human memory

. does not allow for external influences e.g. what happened at home or work so you need to interview as well.

In conclusion, although participant observation is a time consuming method of conducting action research it does produce some very valuable outcomes. Use of systematic observation allows you to:

. gain valuable insights into what is actually going on in your class
. gain ideas for future lesson plans, resources etc.
. address issues of equity, power or control in the class
. make decisions about assessment, when and what type
. look for causal relationships between:
    - students
    - student(s) - teacher
    - student(s) - environment
. evaluate your own teaching practice
. record the specific language of your students using precise descriptors so that other literacy teachers can identify exactly what is happening through the voices of your students

Finally, participant observation is a very enjoyable way of conducting action research. By providing rich descriptions of your particular situations and students you can contribute to the general knowledge of what we do as literacy teachers.

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